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ABSTRACT

This paper provides introductory material for a teacher workshop on the importance of teacher clarity in controlling disruptive behavior in young students. The main thrust is that a teacher must set forth his or her limits on behavior clearly and simply in order for a student to begin setting his or her own limits and thus become self-directed. Sample lesson plans from the workshop are included. (LH)

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"LIMITS"

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A NEED TO SET "LIMITS"

In this paper and particularly in the workshop which follows, I will focus on the subject of "limits," placing an emphasis on a teacher's need to be clear about her own limits, and setting limits for herself before she sets them for her children. This may be a different way of looking at the subject of "limits" for some of you.

Sometimes "controlling disruptive behavior" is thought of as synonomous with the subject of "limits" when in reality, it is only a part, and perhaps the result of causes other than children's so-called "emotional," "home" or "disruptive behavior" problems. Many "disruptive behavior" or "discipline problems" have been blamed on children when their behavior may be an appropriate response to some of the following conditions, especially appropriate in response to the teacher's lack of setting her own limits (#6). A child cannot begin to direct himself until the teacher is clear about her own limits and rules and states them clearly--to pave the way for a child to begin to set his own limits and begin to develop self-direction.

1) A curriculum which doesn't relate to the child and what he wants to learn;
2) A teacher misjudgment of what a child's limits are because she is not clear about her own;
3) Misteaching or not teaching;
4) A room arrangement or structure which invites disruption by allowing for dispersal of energy because of too many choices;
5) Over-stimulation and no focus;
6) By teachers who are afraid to state their own limitations, their own tolerance level in a "responsive" classroom; or
7) By "disruptive" teachers who interfere with children's activity or put them down.

Limits and Consequences

One of the objectives of the Responsive Program is that children learn

to pace themselves. They cannot do this if the teacher does not set limits which are appropriate for herself and the children. A teacher needs to become sensitive to those children who cannot yet pace themselves. She needs to set limits for those children until they are more ready to move on their own. If a child goes beyond a limit which the teacher has set, the teacher needs to know which consequences she can enforce that will be meaningful to the child -- consequences a child can respect; or the teacher will frustrate herself, scream her head off, give empty threats, keep her anger inside, or grimly smile on and on. She may become a laughing stock of a child. For example a teacher who gives a consequence of sending a child to the office for misbehaving needs to be sure she has support from the principal for keeping him there (if indeed that is a consequence a child respects) or she will find him being returned to her with a "ha-ha' ha". Finding appropriate consequences for not going beyond limits is not an easy task and I know of no magic oil, formulas, or easy answers. A teacher needs to experiment and leave room for error so that she doesn't expect too much of herself.

I have tried some of the following which have worked well for children I have worked with but I cannot guarantee that these consequences will work for you. My kindergarten children loved to play in rain puddles. My limit was that to play in them, the children needed to wear boots. My consequence for children who went into puddles without boots was that they sat on the steps during recess. When the complaints came to me from children that they didn't like their consequence (they did respect this one), I asked them what they could do about it. Some replied that their mothers wouldn't remember to send boots. I asked them if they wanted to draw a picture and write a note home.

Several children drew pictures of boots and wrote the word (They had remembered how to write "boo" from Halloween -- "oo" from a sound of surprise I had heard children make one day, which they recalled, and "boot" which rhymed with "root" from root beer we had made one day.)[1] Because sitting on the steps was a consequence which they respected, they were willing to do something to get what they wanted. They were learning to read and write as well.

One child disrupted others in the classroom by shouting while others were resting or while I was reading. I had given permission for shouting at recess or in unison, when I gave permission in the classroom. When a child went beyond my limit of noise in the classroom, I deprived her of shouting at recess and asked her to stay on the steps until she was willing to use her shouting appropriately in the yard. She stopped shouting in the classroom within two weeks.

Often teachers are afraid to state their limits, or occasionally scream at children for going beyond clearly stated limits, or give consequences for misbehavior because of the image of themselves as "mean" teachers. Many have a mistaken image of "I must be nice and let them do what they want." However, teachers may be much meaner to themselves and the children if they don't state their limits and rules.

For me, some of the meanness is that the children will be deprived of meaningful feedback for their behavior and they will not be able to learn what is expected of them in given situations nor will they learn when and what they do is appropriate or inappropriate.

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[1] Biestman, Margot S. "My Kindergarten."

It is important for a teacher to become aware of what her limits are, so the children may be clear about what to expect from her. If teachers are having problems stating limits clearly, I suggest the teacher have tape recordings or video-tapes made. She may begin to listen to her voice quality and may begin to observe what happens when she does and does not state her limits.

The subject of "limits," "rules," "discipline," "consequences" is an extremely large and difficult one. There are no easy answers.

Limits and Room Arrangement

A suggestion for helping teachers begin to deal with limits and discipline in the classroom is to ask teachers to think about a room arrangement they would like to have, and ask them to make a diagram of that room and to describe the room. Ask them what they liked and did not like about the room they set up. Then they may share diagrams with other. Ask them to think about what goes into each area or center they drew. What activities had been planned for each one of the centers? What kind of behavior will they tolerate in the area? What kind won't they tolerate? What rules will they set up? These differ from individual to individual. I have gone into classrooms and found that some teachers don't mind interruptions from many children while they are working with others. I happen to mind that a lot, and so I need to set up a structure to take care of myself. I may say "I'm going to work with this group for now and do not want any interruptions -- I will be with you at such and such a time (that I state). If you do interrupt me during this me, then I won't be with you later and I may get terribly angry and deprive you of an activity you really would like."

Defining Limits

Another suggestion I have is to give workshops on limits. Ask the teachers to write their own definitions of "limits" from their experience. Try a workshop using collage material on paper or ask teachers to describe a disruptive behavior situation, choose one person to role-play and have one play the part of a stubborn child and the other the teacher. Ask other teachers what they would do similarly or different to the role-playing teacher. Ask teachers to read Laboratory material on limits and discipline and to use in the classroom those suggestions which appeal to them.

Many teachers are interested in talking about choices, when it is appropriate to give a child a choice, when it's not appropriate. I might ask teachers what rules would they begin with when they invite children to come to a center--what is teachers' own level of tolerance if they give children a choice to come, what alternatives do they have if the child is disruptive in that group, what consequences will they give that a child would respect--when is it appropriate to not give a choice (this may have to do with school safety rules or a school rule that no gum can be chewed).

I would like to say that I appreciate very deeply the "bind" in which many Program Advisors find themselves with their teachers. Teachers and assistants often demand of Program Advisors that they come back from the Laboratory with THE word of what limits should be in a classroom, what kind of behavior should be acceptable (what kind of limits should be set.) On the other hand, we, at the Lab, set up for you and ask that you set up for your teachers, learning situations which give you an opportunity to discover how you and teachers work with limits--what you and teachers need, what is appropriate for you and what is appropriate for children.

You may have had previous experiences in being given answers, information and suggestions, without asking or without trying to solve a problem by discovery. Previously, knowledge may have been imparted to you by one person, often an "expert," telling what is to be done and how to do it. If you impart this knowledge to teachers as an "expert," they will come to expect to be given answers. From my experience and from others, I have learned that imparting a body of knowledge to another person by telling them does not change education nor does it help a person to really learn and digest material for themselves. The "bind" occurs when teachers are given an opportunity to learn by discovery when they are used to being given answers. Then, they are faced with change and their resistance to it. What they expect is different from what they are actually being given and they may respond with appropriate resentment.

NOTE: I have adapted this concept of "Limits" using Responsive Program principles and ideas with members of Follow Through staff, from development by Institute for Creative and Artistic Development.

Limits -- Lesson Plan

A WORKSHOP FOR PROGRAM ADVISORS AND/OR

TEACHERS AND AIDES

Purpose:

1. To introduce concept of limits and need for them.
2. Recognize that one person's limits are different from others -- that no one way to set limits is the right way.
3. To demonstrate how people respond and function within given limits -- how they use what they like and don't like -- emphasizing similarities and differences of experiences -- rather than what is "right" for one must be right for another.
4. Respect for individual differences.
5. Definition of "limits" for individuals.
6. Recognition that P.A.s, teachers, aides need to be aware of their own limitations and tolerance before setting appropriate limits for children.
7. To make an analogy from how participants function with collage materials to what needs each would have in a classroom -- for setting limits for herself, students, in relationship to room environment.
8. Give participants a choice to participate or actively observe -- observer to give feedback.

Materials:

One piece of construction paper of 3 different sizes for each participant: 18" x 24", 12" x 18", 9" x 12".

One paper bag for each participant.

Material of different colors and textures in each paper bag -- an amount which may be organized and arranaged on the largest size construction paper.

Ground rules:

1. Individuals work without touching other individuals or their work.
2. Communication is to be non-verbal except when leader requests verbal statement and if participants are willing to respond.

Instructions:

1. Each participant chooses 3 pieces of construction paper, 1 of each size and a "goodie bag."
2. Put your hands inside the bag. Without looking, let your hands explore the materials, slowly, with care. Which do you like, which do you not like?
3. Explore your largest size paper with your hands -- feel its texture, size, limits.
4. When you are ready, place all of the materials from your "goodie bag" on your largest sheet of paper, in arrangement and organization, which pleased you.
5. If you are willing, state what you like about your arrangement, state what you don't like about it.
6. Place all of the material from your goodie bag on your middle size sheet of paper in a way which pleases you.
7. What do you like, what do you not like?
8. Place all of the material on your smallest sheet in a way which pleases you.
9. What do you like, what do you not like?

For Participants:

Write a brief description of your experience.

What did you learn about establishing limits from your experience?

Write a definition of limits from your experience.

Observers:

From what you observed what analogy can you make to setting limits for children and teachers in a classroom?

Write a definition of "limits" from your experience of observing.

Small group sharing: each person read his analogies. Discuss similarities and differences. Appoint one person who will record what each has said and report to large group.

Large group: report.

"It is important to keep the focus of "what do you like and what don't you like"; "how would you work similarly, how would you work differently," during discussion periods to avoid "what is right or wrong for everyone" or implications of value judgments.

Note: Lesson plan using concept of "limits" adapted for use at Far West Lab from ideas and development by Institute for Creative and Artistic Development.

LIMITS LESSON PLAN #2

1. Give each participant a copy of a Transcription and Description of a spontaneous spelling lesson.
2. Read the transcription. As you read, write your responses -- what you think is going on with the children, the teacher.
3. Write what you liked about how the teacher handled the limits and rules, and write what you did not like about the way the teacher handled limits and rules, and why.
4. Read your papers to a partner.
5. In group discuss what you would do similarly, what you would do differently.
6. Alternative discussion: What feedback would you give to this teacher?
7. Give papers on limitations which we have available. These may be used as resources in the future, or for those members who do not want to do the assignment, they may read papers and talk about what they liked and what they didn't like in the papers.

VIDEO TAPE OF A SPONTANEOUS SPELLING LESSON -- 1ST GRADE

Transcription of Description Prepared for a

Workshop on "Limits" for Program Advisors*

Six or seven children surround the teacher, as she is about to read a story. Some are sitting. Some are standing. The noise level in the classroom is very high. There is a lot of activity throughout the room.

A few children are talking about a singing group that performed a song on television. One child, not part of the group, interrupts from another part of the room and asks the teacher, "What does p-i-c-k-l-e spell?"

Because the noise level is so high, the teacher cannot hear all of the letters. The teacher's voice is tense, and high pitched. At times, she sounds exasperated. The girl brings the book with the word to the teacher. "Pickle," says the teacher.

The discussion continues about the song and the television show. Two boys are at the board. One boy has written: stars, fash, fan, ra. He asks, "How do you spell -- ?" The teacher cannot hear. She decides to play a spontaneous spelling game, instead of reading a story.

Teacher: What did you spell? Fash? What is Fash? You're going to spell house? You want to do some spelling? Erase those words and I'll tell you the words. Anybody want to --

(Sandra walks in front of the teacher. The teacher reaches her arms out to Sandra, puts her hands on Sandra's waist, and pulls her toward her. Sandra leans on the teahcer's leg and looks down as the teacher talks).

* Transcription prepared by Jane Pechman

Teacher: You have walked in the middle of our group. We were doing something. I cannot have you -- now you'll have to go play someplace else. (When the teacher finishes her statement, Sandra walks away, sitting in another part of the group).

She sits with some of the members of the group, not following teacher's directions.

Robert: Can I go up after they've done these?

Teacher: Yes you may. (Annie comes up to join group). Annie, we have some things going on here. You may sit down.

Annie: Can I write something?

Teacher: No, it's not your turn. (To the boy at the blackboard): You want to write a word. I'll think it up and you write it. (Beatrice comes and leans against the teacher's leg. The teacher puts her arm around the child's waist).

Mark: (not at the board) f-

Teacher: Let him hear the sounds. Fa. St. (emphasizing the fa, st sounds as she says them). Fast. (child writes f-a-s-t) Good. Your a is almost like an o. (Child extends the stem of the a) Very good.

Margaret: I think I'll try?

Teacher: You think you'll try? All right, Margaret. (Margaret goes to the board) Four. The number four. (Margaret writes it). That's excellent. (Margaret looks at the word very briefly and sits down).

Robert, you want to write one?

(One child calls out the word "one")

Teacher: I want a harder one than that.

Margaret: Mine wasn't so hard.

Teacher: (emphasizing the st sound, as she says it) "Stand." Robert. Margaret, it's not your turn. It's Robert's turn. Robert you may erase their's so you'll have more room. Eric, sit down so Robert has a space to move his arms. He needs lots of room. "St" (nods her head as the child looks to her for approval to the st that he has written) "And." (repeats, insistently) "And." (emphasizing the d. Robert writes ao.) "And." (emphasizing the nd sound. Robert looks at the letters he has just written. He puts the chalk to the right of the "o" as if he is going to add on to the word" "And." Before that Robert. There should be something else. (Robert looks at what he has written). The last one. (Robert erases the o.) Now -- nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn. (Robert writes n) Now--"and." (emphasizing the d. Robert writes a d with a very short stem: It looks like an a. Another child jumps up. The noise level is very high.) Make it nice and tall so we can see that last letter. "Stand." (Robert begins to write a new letter next to the short stemmed d. Other children call out "d.") Wait. (Robert looks at the teacher) You don't understand me. The last letter. (Robert erases the beginning of the next letter. He looks straight ahead at the board) Look at me. (He turns toward the teacher) "And." (emphasizing the d) "And" (again, emphasizing the d) What do you hear last? "And."

Robert: a

Teacher: "And." Listen. The last sound. What do you hear last? (Robert looks at the board, away from the teacher. He puts his head slightly downward. Shyly.)

(Other children in the group repeat the "d" outloud)

Teacher: You're making --make that last letter "d." So you can add that --

(Robert writes d. Teacher nods and smiles). So your last letter should be "d." That's it. (Still smiling) (Robert lengthens the stem so that it looks more like a d. He puts the chalk down, turn around, and smiles shyly) Very good! That was a hard one. (Robert turns back towards the board, and erases his word with his shirt sleeve.)

Beatrice: I want one!

Teacher (to Beatrice): You want one?

Beatrice: (goes to the board and looks down) A hard one. (nodding her head)

Teacher: A hard one? "Wagon." (Beatrice begins writing "Wag") ah, as in octopus. (Margaret jumps up, in front of some children in the group Margaret, you're distracting. (During this time Beatrice writes "on"-- Teacher doesn't look.

Beatrice: I want another one. A real hard one.

Teacher: A real hard one? That one was so easy. O.K. Erase that one. I'll think of another.

Margaret: I want another one.

Eric: Hey, let's get Baron one. Cause he don't know how to read!

Teacher: Well, if he doesn't want to do one then we shouldn't call on him. And when he wants to do one, he will. (Teacher looks exasperated. Several children are talking now.) All right, cut. Cut.

Beatrice: That's easy.

Teacher: Well. Write it anyway (smiling, nodding her head) Cu, cut. (Beatrice writes K-u-t. She writes it very large. She turns around when she finishes and smiles)

Teacher: All right, can you write it another way? Write it another way?

(Beatrice begins to write K again) Another "kuh" sound. Another letter that makes "kuh."

Beatrice: Oh -- she erases the k.

Teacher: cu -- ut.

(Beatrice writes: c-u-t.)

Teacher: Very good, Beatrice. That's very good.

Beatrice: (smiling, erases "cut") I know how to write "but."

Teacher: You know how to write "but?" All right.

(Beatrice turns toward the board and begins to write.)

(Another child, waving his hand in the air says: "Can I have a turn now?")

Teacher: It's Beatrice's turn now.

(Beatrice writes b-u-t.)

Teacher: Good. Can you write "rut?"

(Beatrice smiles and looks at the teacher. Several children in the group whine and complain: "It's my turn." "I want a turn now.")